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ABSTRACT

The Academic Foundations Department at Rutgers University developed an alternative method for encouraging writing that allows the students to work together in small groups. This method, called group composing, has many advantages: it is process-oriented rather than product-focused; it allows students to become aware of the options available to them as writers, to solve for themselves the puzzles of written expression by seeing the results of a number of different strategies; and it provides a new setting for composing by eliminating the teacher-directed composition class and replacing it with a student-centered learning atmosphere. The group composing process begins when students individually write sentences related to a given topic sentence. The students then meet in small groups, where they develop those independently generated thoughts into a unified, coherent paragraph. This sharing of ideas in small groups eliminates the solitude of the composing experience that so often inhibits and intimidates students' initial efforts to write on a topic. Group composing also gives student writers needed experiences as both writer and audience, whereby they learn to consider the needs of others when expressing ideas. (A brief history of how group composing developed at Rutgers and examples of student work within the process are included.) (RL)

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GROUP COMPOSING: A CLASSROOM TECHNIQUE

By

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Basic writing students* come into college classes to learn to write formal, academic prose. We as teachers almost invariably direct our students' attention to certain rules and formulas, then demand that they compose alone incorporating them. However, most of the products we receive do not conform to traditional academic standards because the students are unable to: 1) produce sentences as discreet units; 2) produce paragraphs as larger units of thought, themselves components of an even larger reality, the essay; 3) edit, revise,and rewrite; and 4) conform to "accepted" grammar and usage standards.

* We have borrowed the term Basic Writing Student from Mina Shaughnessy. Although not in general use at Rutgers-Newark, Shaughnessy's term satisfies these authors more than "developmental writing student," or worse yet, "remedial writing student."

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Traditionally, we attempt to remediate these problems by re-emphasizing what has failed in the past; isolated writing experiences preceded by skills teaching. But perhaps individual composing experiences, relying on teacher-established rules, are not, by themselves, the best way to accomplish our goals.

Encouraged by the works of Emig (1971), Elbow (1973), Bruffee (1973), Hawkins (1976), and others, we in the Academic Foundations Department at Rutgers-Newark developed an alternative method for encouraging writing that allows the students to work together in small groups. This method, called Group Composing, has many advantages. It is process-oriented rather than product-focused; it is ongoing rather than complete; it is dynamic rather than stagnant. It lays open all the false starts and pitfalls of composing and generates as many remedies as there are students in the group. It allows students to become aware of the options available to them as writers, to solve for themselves the puzzles of written expression by seeing the results of a number of different strategies. Finally, it provides a new setting for composing by eliminating the teacher-directed composition class and replacing it with a student-centered learning atmosphere.

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Group Composing at Rutgers-Newark first began in the Learning Center - an environment established for students needing extra help - as an attempt to motivate four seemingly non-responsive students. One of the goals at this first session was to make the composing "fun."

The four students were given chalk and a topic sentence on the blackboard, "The food in the student center is _____." They were told to first form an opinion of the food at the center and then fill in the blank. They were not asked to come to an immediate agreement on a word, but to list as many possibilities as they could. Since the list of words was completely negative, the goal and tone of the paragraph was determined; the paragraph would, by the nature of its details, implicitly persuade people not to eat in the student center. The rest of the instructions were to write whatever else came to mind that related to the topic sentence. The students were to stay at the board, adding to each other's thoughts or making changes and deletions, but erasing nothing. All writing, whether it was ultimately rejected or maintained, was to remain on the board.

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After twenty minutes of talking and writing, a paragraph began to emerge. During this time the instructor was non-directive, a departure from more conventional classroom activities. Later, in response to the instructor's questions, students were able to: identify the parameters of the paragraph; distinguish between ideas of greater and lesser importance; recognize relationships among the sentences and decide on appropriate transitions between them; and determine the need for elaboration, either in further idea development or in closure through a restatement sentence. We have since found that the instructor need only ask basic questions in order to explore whole realms of revision. Not the instructor, but the shared effort on the blackboard, is the catalyst.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of the first tentative Group Composing venture was that the students actually enjoyed doing it. They had "fun" and wanted to do it again. There was laughter, something usually absent from the composition classroom; there was talking, an exchange of ideas that fostered argument, criticism, support, and agreement. We were more than satisfied not only with watching the process unfold, something few teachers ever see, but with the actual product.

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On the basis of this modest success, we decided to adapt Group Composing to classroom use. Happily, this necessitated but one major change. Because the earlier method would prove too chaotic when four or five groups tried simultaneously to write on a board or an easel, we decided to have each student compose one sentence relating to the topic sentence at his seat, and then transfer it to the board.

We each tried the revised Group Composing in classes of twenty to twenty-three students divided into five groups. The students, most of them out of high school not more than a month, were participating in the Academic Foundations Department summer program, a program funded by EOF and designed to ready minority and educationally disadvantaged students for a regular freshman schedule at the Rutgers-Newark College of Arts and Sciences the following fall.

The students were given the topic sentence, "College differs from high school." We had two reasons for choosing this particular sentence. First, movement into college was an experience our students were undergoing. The writing would be "real," not a "dummy-run," Dixon (1967).

Secondly, it elicited a comparison/contrast paragraph requiring the form of organization that even very sophisticated composition students find challenging. In this instance, our intent was not to teach this method of development, but to test the bounds of Group Composing by seeing just how much these students could discover on their own.

Once the initial, privately written sentences were placed on the board, the students directed their attention to the following set of questions which had been distributed earlier. These questions were designed to serve as a focus for editing and discussion:

1) Do all of the sentences relate to the topic sentence? If not, can any be eliminated?

2) Are any of the sentences so close in meaning that they can be combined?

3) Does what we have hang together? Does the paragraph flow smoothly? If so, why? If not, why?

4) Do we need to say any more -- is there enough? If not, the group needs to write more sentences.

The groups "talked out" these questions and began to make changes on the shared work on the boards and easels. A flurry of activity followed. The only restraint imposed on their freedom was that erasures were not allowed. They

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needed to see where they had been to be able to see how far they had come.

We have selected the work of one group from one class to use as our example. The untouched, shared work appears below on the left. Additions the students made after writing down the original sentences appear slightly above the line. Deletions are slightly crossed out. Some analysis and remarks about the changes appear on the right.

Topic Sentence: College Differs From High School

A. In college one has more freedom to act in the classroom as one feels not as the teacher wishes you to act.

The person who wrote "A" seemed to be the dominant force in the group because "A" remained unedited and became the model for person, voice, and tone.

B. ~~College differs from high school because you have~~ Also there is a lot more independence to develop at your own rate of ability to become a more productive member of society.

Changes in "B" illustrate student's desire to eliminate redundancy of the clause "College differs from high school." It also eliminates the familiar second person. The editing of "in college" in "D" is done for the same reason. By adding "Also there is" in "B", the students exchange an awkward repetition for a more functional transition.

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C^1. College differs from high school in many ways.*	In "C" the change from first to third person shows sensitivity for person and voice and indicates an attempt to be consistent with 'A" and revised "B". Perhaps the students read "A" through "D" aloud and liked the more formal sounding third person which also is the person used for generalizing. The students also appropriately changed the verbs.
C^2. For example, in college <u>one feels</u> ~~we feel~~ and are treated <u>as an adult</u> ~~like adults~~, whereas in high school we are always being under the constant watch of <u>one's</u> ~~our~~ teacher.	In "C" the change from "like adults" to "as an adult" reveals a concern for pronoun reference. In "C" the topic sentence "College differs from high school" is modified to "College differs from high school in many ways." This modification is less general, more concrete and perhaps fulfills a need to focus and organize.
*C is subdivided into C^1 and C^2 to indicate the two grammatical units. They are written by the the same student.	
D. ~~In college~~ everyone is expected <u>to accomplish</u> ~~to do~~ a certain amount of work but it's all up to the individual to do it.	In "D" the change from "to do" to "to accomplish" seems to be a tone consideration and is in keeping with the switch to the more formal third person which increases distancing.

After the students shared their sentences and did some initial editing, they rewrote the sentences in paragraph form with some further editorial changes. The transformation of

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the previous string of sentences to the edited version below is not an unqualified Cinderella story, but some interesting changes occurred. These three steps, from topic sentence to this final version, took thirty-five minutes. As with the original sentences, additions appear above the line. Some analysis and remarks about this edited version appear below the students' paragraph.

1. College differs from high school in many ways. 2. For example, in college one feels and is treated as an adult, whereas in high school one is always being under the constant watch of one's teacher. 3. In college one has more freedom to act in the classroom as one feels not as the teacher wishes ~~you~~ one to act. 4. Everyone is expected to accomplish a certain amount of work but it's all up to the individual to do it. 5. Also there is a lot more independence to develop at ~~your~~ one's own rate of ability and become a more productive member of society.

In this finished version the students have re-organized and re-ordered the original sentences so that the progression is from high school to college and then to the larger society. The movement is also from past, to present, to future. "B" in the original is "5" in this version (it has been moved from second to last

sentence). Perhaps "B" (5) fulfilled the need for closure with mention of the larger society. "C^1" and "C^2" from the original become the topic sentence and second sentence in this version. Perhaps the group saw the organizing effect of "C" (movement from general to specific) and used it as the focal point of this edited version. The group also arrived at an ABAB form of organizing and developing a comparison/contrast. By the end of the paragraph (sentences "4" and "5") the subject of the comparison/contrast becomes implicit. Interestingly, sentence "3" amplifies "2," almost as if some member of the group had said "I don't get your drift." There is an excellent explanation of this concept of paragraph unity in Bruffee (1972) and Shaughnessy (1977).

After the group composing was completed, the students were asked to tell (in writing) what occurred in the group. Their comments throw some additional light on group composing as a student-centered method for learning. Most importantly, all the comments dealt with reading work aloud and discussing it, activities not normally part of the students' composing process. Most of the comments pertained to paragraph organization, but students were also concerned with

grammar and mechanics, and eliminating repetition and deadwood.

The following comments from one student, which we edited for grammar and spelling, best summarize what happened:

> We first started by writing down our sentences on the paper. We then decided which sentences should come first, second, third, and fourth. Before we wrote each sentence down we looked and checked to see if there was anything wrong with it. If there was something wrong with the sentence, suggestions were thrown into the open. We then decided which one was right and best fit the sentence. It was fairly easy to write the paragraph because we listened to everyone who had something to say. By sharing our ideas and opinions, we wrote a pretty good paragraph. We congratulated each other on a job well done.

Group Composing leads to discovery of the internal and external characteristics of the paragraph; after three to four episodes, the students are often able to make the following observations about paragraph development and organization:

1) Paragraphs are units of writing, each containing a main idea supported by any number of details.

2) Details within the paragraph are ordered based on relationships between the details and the main idea, and relationships among the details themselves.

3) Not all details related to the main idea will strengthen it.

4) Cohesiveness within the paragraph can be achieved through the use of linking and transitional devices.

Briefly then, Group Composing is the process by which students individually write sentences related to a given topic sentence, and then as a group develop those independently generated thoughts into a unified and coherent paragraph.

What concerns us, as teachers of writing, is how to better help students overcome their composing difficulties. How can we more expertly engage our students and guide them through the hazards of written discourse, encouraging them not only to write, but to enjoy their expressive abilities?

We here at Rutgers, through our Group Composing strategies, think we have found some answers to these

questions. One thing is certain; our students enjoyed the Group Composing experience. In addition, they learned some important lessons about paragraph development.

Certainly, whether teachers use Group Composing or not, attention must be paid to the students' comments about reading their work aloud and discussing it. Some may consider this part of prewriting, but it should also be integrated into the next phase of composing -- the writing. Students can learn to "hear" their work in ways that silent reading does not provide. The opportunity for discussion and sharing ideas and comments seems to be a vital part not only of the composing acts, but of learning in general as well. Indeed, as Moffett and Wagner (1976) point out, students develop their thinking and verbalizing skills for reading and writing through discussion.

Certainly, we as educators know the value of exchanging ideas; yet rarely, if ever, do we encourage this once a piece of discourse is underway. Perhaps it is time to re-examine our practices. Maybe supportive

group activity which encourages the process rather than the product needs to be tried. In effect, having students compose, produce and edit alone has failed as a teaching device.

Sharing has another advantage for students who have been doing poorly or feeling uncomfortable with composing. Sharing and working with others eliminates the solitude of the composing experience -- a solitude which for many is agonizing.

When students are engaged in a group episode, they are involved in the processes of "significant learning" outlined by Rogers (1969). They are personally involved at cognitive and affective levels; their learning is self-initiated; they tend to shift in attitude and behavior from the critical to the supportive; and their skills of self-evaluation are heightened through seeing the composing acts of others.

Through Group Composing the student writer has the opportunity to try his hand at being both the writer and the audience, almost simultaneously. He learns to consider the needs of others when he expresses himself in either role. And finally, he shares in a communication act which is much more lively than the traditional one way student to teacher interaction.

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Past educational experiences have probably not demanded that students take an active role in their own learning. In Group Composing passivity is not rewarded, and students soon see that they are part of what Thom Hawkins calls a "community of learners." In a sense, the students have moved out of the realm of the classroom and into the real world with a real audience.

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Richard Meyers, Louisa Rogers and David Sloan are members of the Academic Foundations Department at Rutgers-Newark where Group Composing was developed. The method was demonstrated at the Third Annual Rutgers Writing Workshop in April 1978. It was presented this March at the National Conference of Remedial/Developmental Studies in Post-Secondary Institutions in Chicago.